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ABSTRACT

Teacher attitudes toward reading and their knowledge of techniques to improve students' reading skills were assessed in a questionnaire survey of faculty members at Tennessee State University. Results from the 72 valid responses (out of 175 questionnaires distributed) indicated that college teachers need, and would like, more information about the teaching of reading and the identification and remediation of students with reading problems. A cloze test given to 100 freshmen the following semester indicated that 82% were reading at a frustration level on two frequently used freshman texts. (AA)

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READING AND THE COLLEGE TEACHER: A SURVEY

By: Dr. Carole Stice

A frequently heard criticism of entering college freshmen, and indeed of many college students in general, is their apparent steadily declining reading ability. Although reading may not be the main source of information for many college students, (Spring, 1975) reading prowess is obviously still a vital learning tool. During my first year as a college faculty member I heard a multitude of criticisms, complaints and cries for help from collegues who maintained that too many of their students could not adequately read. Such conversation prompted an investigation to find out what college teachers do to help improve learning via reading in their classrooms.

In an effort to supply some needed information which might be useful to the reading faculty and the staff of the University Learning Resources Center in our efforts to help both students and concerned teachers, a limited survey was conducted. A restricted response questionnaire was developed dealing with several aspects of teacher attitudes toward reading and teacher knowledge of both reading and the available resources that exist within the University. The questionnaire was distributed to all members of the Tennessee State University faculty who were currently engaged in teaching at least one freshman or sophomore course.

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Tennessee State University is located in Nashville, Tennessee. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial institution with an enrollment of approximately 4, 900 students, and a teaching faculty of two-hundred and twenty-one full time teachers. Tennessee State University can be considered representative of state supported institutions of similar size in the mid-south area.

Procedure:

The questionnaire contained thirty-one limited response items comprising two sub-sections. The sub-sections dealt with a.) teacher attitudes toward reading in college level subject matter classrooms and, b.) teacher knowledge of techniques that are designed to improve reading or to compensate for a range of reading abilities among students.

Following the thirty-one limited response items was an open-ended section asking for comments or suggestions. Approximately half of the returns contained information in that section.

Of the one hundred-seventy questionnaires sent out, seventy-six were completed and returned for a return of 45%. However, six of the returned questionnaires were found to be unusable, either because the respondent was not a teacher of freshman or sophomore courses, or because he/she failed to mark the designated spaces making interpretation impossible. These six were deleted, leaving 72 valid forms for a 42% return. The return was not accepted as final until a telephone follow-up to each of the University departmental offices had been conducted. The results may not

be representative of the entire faculty to whom the questionnaires were sent since the returns reflected the attitudes and information of only those teachers concerned enough to fill it out and send it back.

The date collected was tabulated and percentages calculated for each of the possible choices on the thirty-one items. These results were then regrouped for reporting purposes according to the sub-sections.

A record was kept of the responses to the open-ended comments section. Like entries were grouped together and percentages calculated based on the total number of separate comments offered by the respondents to that section.

Results:

An inspection of the data revealed some interesting information concerning reading and the college teacher. Regarding the relative importance of reading to the learning process on the college level, 83% of the respondents agreed that reading is the most important communication skill needed by college students. In addition, 77% agreed that as college teachers they should assume some of the responsibility for improving the reading abilities of their students. (Table 1)

Sixty-three percent (63%) of the teachers returning questionnaires believe that the majority of their students cannot successfully read and understand the text materials used. Of that

63%, more than half were in Science, Mathematics, English, or History, the heavily academic subjects that require sophisticated reading skills. However, 81% of the respondents admitted that they did not check the reading levels of their texts, 64% revealed that they did not check the reading levels of their students, and 56% agreed that they did not test to determine whether their students could in fact read their textbooks adequately. In addition, 58% said they did not know which of their freshmen or sophomores were enrolled in the Reading Improvement Courses offered by the Learning Resources Center on campus, and 88% stated they did not know the criteria by which students are placed in the Reading Improvement Courses.

Interestingly enough, 95% of the respondents maintained that they are aware of which students have reading problems. However, nearly 90% admitted they needed some techniques for determining which students might benefit from the Reading Improvement Courses. It became quite clear when analyzing the data that college teachers seem to have too little information about reading and that they know few techniques for dealing with reading problems in the regular classroom. (Table 2).

It also appears that college teachers believe themselves to be doing little to help improve students' reading abilities, however 66% of the respondents to this survey stated they were concerned and willing to receive assistance. In addition, nearly 90% admitted they would like more information concerning identification

of and referral procedures for students with reading problems. It is also pertinent to note that 41% of the open-ended responses dealt with teachers' desires for information concerning testing and teaching techniques for non-reading teachers. (Table 1)..

One piece of information that was made overwhelmingly clear in the responses was that the vast majority, 93.6%, of the teachers returning questionnaires expressed in some manner the position that while the college classroom teacher may realistically be required to deal with students' reading difficulties, they feel they are not presently capable of doing so effectively due to lack of time and training. It was reitereated that to attempt to correct reading deficiencies would only damage subject matter instruction.

However, the most startling fact, in the opinion of this investigator, was that nearly 30% of the comments in the open-ended section revealed that the respondents see little connection between reading skills and learning skills. For example, "It is not the goal of any English course to improve reading," or, "As I see it, my job is to teach subject matter and not reading."

Finally, the opinion was proferred by 34% of the returns that a cut off point in reading ability should be built in to college entrance requirements, especially in State supported institutions with open admissions policies. It was suggested that students who do not pass the reading level requirement should be directed to pursue another avenue of training or that they spend time improving their communication skills prior to acceptance into college.

Table 1. (a. attitudes)

item	agree	no opinion	disagree
You would like more information concerning identifying and helping students with reading problems.	89%	0%	11%
You would like information concerning referral of students to the college reading clinic.	89%	0%	11%
Reading is the most important communication skill needed by college students.	83%	2%	16%
Reading skill is as important as subject matter knowledge	79%	4%	16%
College teachers have the added responsibility of helping improve students' reading.	77%	6%	16%
You would like to know what reading skills are important for reading in your subject matter area.	60%	17%	22%
You would like to learn some techniques for improving students' reading skills while teaching content	41%	39%	19%
You would like to know ways to compensate for a wide range of reading abilities within a class	41%	39%	19%

Table 2 (b. techniques)

item	agree	no opinion	disagree
You provide your students with study guides for the topics covered in class	64%	13%	23%
You teach the meanings of difficulty or technical words that are encountered in your subject.	54%	28%	18%
Your direct your students in a survey of the text-book at the start of each course	43%	22%	35%
You gear your outside readings to fit the levels of your students	39%	11%	51%
You direct your students in a survey of each chapter prior to reading and study.	38%	26%	35%
You check the reading levels of your students.	37%	0%	64%
Your students can adequate-ly read your texts	34%	2%	63%
You teach your students a method of study that is suited to your sub-ject matter.	21%	32%	48%
You know which of your students are enrolled in the college reading clinic.	18%	23%	58%
You test to find if your students can in fact read your texts	16%	28%	56%

Table 2 (cont.)

item	agree	no opinion	disagree
You can list the reading skills most necessary to your subject area.	11%	14%	75%
You use some procedures such as the cloze procedure to help improve your students' comprehension of the texts.	11%	20%	68%
You use more than one textbook with some of your classes, varying the degree of difficulty.	11%	25%	63%
You know the procedure for referring students to the reading clinic.	7%	21%	72%
You check the readability of your texts by application of a formula.	7%	11%	81%

Summary and Conclusions:

The data gathered by this survey reveals that many college teachers are in need of information concerning the reading field. Just as most high school subject area teachers lack knowledge concerning reading, (Braam and Walker, 1973) so apparantly do many content area college level teachers. However, the college teachers in this survey appear to be receptive to assistance and aware of their lack of certain information and skills for dealing with students' reading difficulties.

Specifically, college teachers need to know how to quickly and accurately identify students who have reading problems. They must know how to refer those in need to whatever facility exists within the University setting for helping pupils improve their reading skills. They also need to know how to assess the readability of text materials, and how to determine whether each student can adequately read the texts used. In addition, many college teachers appear to want to incorporate into their teaching certain recommended techniques for improving reading skills and for compensating for a wide range of reading abilities within the classroom.

Disseminating needed information and helping Tennessee State University faculty members develop certain skills and techniques that will enhance the learning that takes place in their classes can best be accomplished in two ways. The creation of a quarterly newsletter, printed by the Learning Resources Center describing various aspects of testing and treatment of reading disorders, tips for the subject matter teacher, as well as a summary of at least

one research study on reading at the college level is recommended. This letter should be distributed across the campus and will provide a communication channel, and an awareness of the Learning Resources Center's function, that does not now exist. In addition, the reading faculty and the staff must develop in-service training workshops, and be available to work with individual teachers upon request. These in-service sessions should attempt to describe and give practice in the application of certain techniques such as those cited in Table 2 for improving learning through reading in the regular classroom.

The final recommendation, based on the study, was that the University should determine how well its freshmen and sophomores do in deed read their classroom text materials.

Epilogue:

During the semester following the faculty survey, an assessment of the reading abilities of 100 University freshmen and sophomores was conducted. The assessment consisted of the application of two clozure tests. The cloze passages were approximately 300 words in length with every 10th word omitted for a total of 25 blanks. One cloze text was taken from the most frequently used freshmen American History text and the other was taken from the most frequently used freshmen English Literature text. The criteria established by Bormuth (1968) was utilized to determine the percentages of students who could read those texts adequately.

The results were as follows:

Reading Levels	Criteria	Percent
Independent	above 50% correct response	8.0%
Instructional	40% to 50%	10.0%
Frustration	40% and between	82.0%

It is clear from the results of both the survey and the informal reading assessment of 100 freshmen that there is a great need to assist classroom teachers so that students improve their literacy skills.

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